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Out of the Attic

The desire for streetcars in Alexandria

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Image: Washington, Alexandria and Mount Vernon Electric Railway. Photo, Alexandria Library.

Del Ray and St. Elmo have long been recognized as early examples of the “Streetcar suburb,” but what is amazing is just how early this new transit option was developed through the area.

In an age when the first automobiles were used for racing or the new sport of “motoring,” the Washington, Alexandria and Mount Vernon Electric Railway began operation in 1892, just four years after the new electric streetcar technology was first introduced by Frank Julian Sprague in Richmond.

Sprague, an 1878 graduate of the United States Naval Academy, became well known for his electrical innovations on ships where he was deployed as a naval officer, including the inverted dynamo and the first electric call-bell system installed on a vessel. His many contributions to the development of the electrical motor and his fascination with technology relating to the effortless movement of people led him to become known as the “Father of Electric Traction” and influenced urban development throughout the world.

Not only did Sprague install the first urban streetcar system in 1888, but just as the Del Ray streetcar system began operation, he established the Sprague Electric Elevator Company enabling buildings to be built taller.

Sprague’s influence on urban life and spatial development permitted cities to expand both laterally and vertically.

He was also instrumental in eliminating the major public nuisance on New York’s Manhattan Island, the heavy smoke and soot emanating from coal-fired, ground level trains traversing the northern half of the island to Grand Central Station.

Sprague was part of a team that depressed the tracks beneath a beautiful urban boulevard, Park Avenue, and elevated the urban street grade high across a wide swath of tracks that was completely underground. This transformation was achieved by the development of the third rail bottom contact for high speed electrical propulsion.

In Virginia at the turn of the century, Del Ray’s streetcar line enabled residents to realize what became known as the “American Dream,” owning a home and small plot of land in the country while living a just short ride away from a cluttered urban downtown. Although unrecognized at the time, this was the beginning of the separation of socio-economic classes within and from American cities.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

But even this idealized vision of early suburban life had its challenges. The first streetcars used in Del Ray, including Motor # 6 seen here, were purchased from the J.G. Brill Company of Philadelphia that had formerly built horse-drawn omnibuses called horsecars.

John George Brill had started the company in 1868, constructing large wooden vehicles to transport urban dwellers to the outer reaches of American cities, allowing passengers to sit and relax while traveling three miles in the same amount of time it took to walk two.

When the efficiency of streetcar systems was implemented by Sprague, Brill quickly adapted to electric power, but his first models often stalled or broke down altogether, leading to a multitude of complaints. They were replaced with new Brill cars about 1906, and these new versions were very reliable and kept in use until the line finally closed in 1932.

By then, the growing popularity and affordability of automobiles for personal use, coupled with changes in government policies favoring roads over mass transit, sounded the death knell for America's streetcar systems. Almost immediately after the line closed, the George Washington Memorial Parkway was built using the former streetcar right-of-way south of Great Hunting Creek to reach Mount Vernon.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.